



N* 5573. 149

379-389



GIVEN BY

your children and their gangs



children's bureau publication no. 384—1960

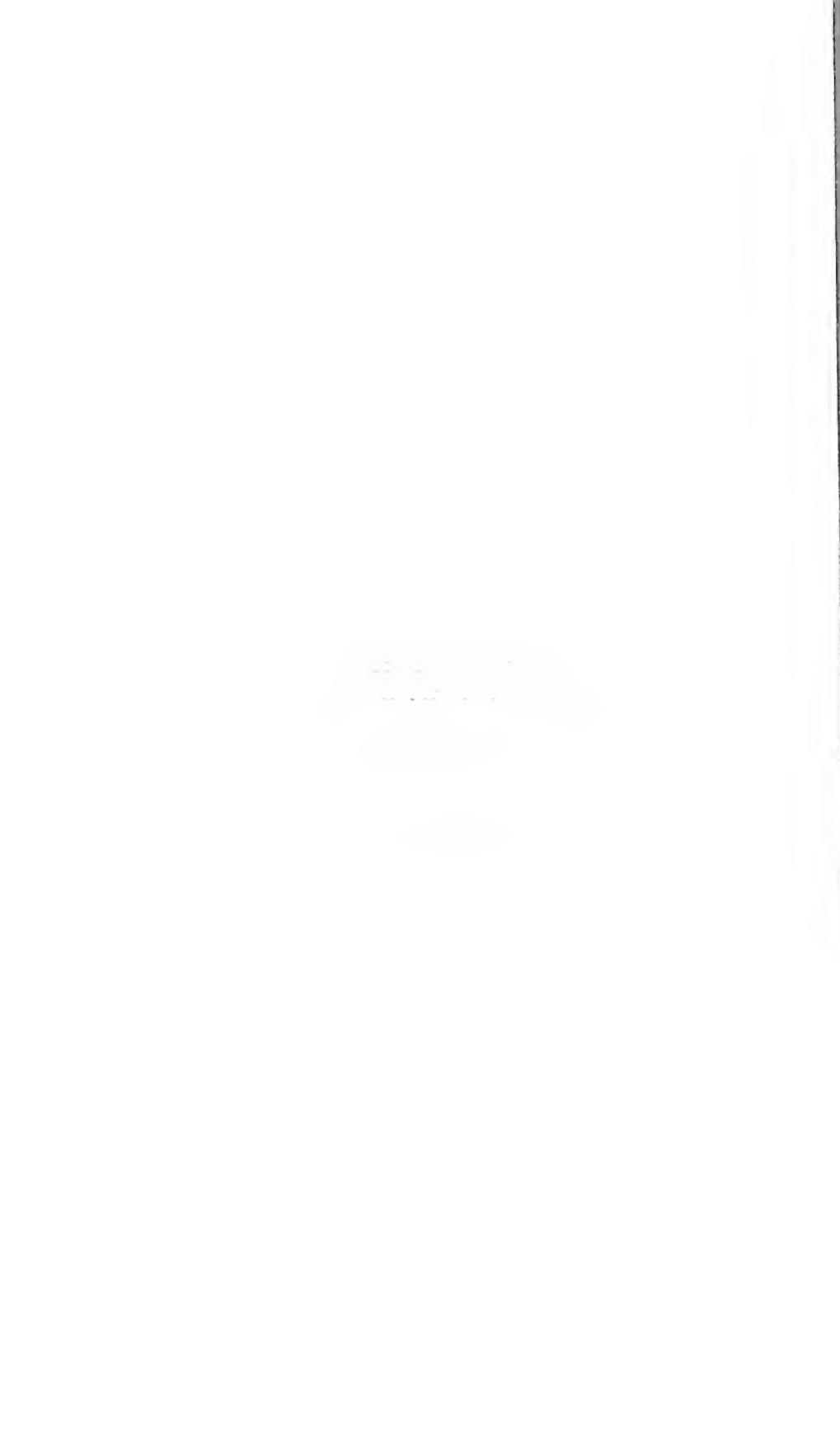
your children and their gangs

EDITH G. NEISSER

NINA RIDENOUR

**U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION, AND WELFARE
Social Security Administration • 1960 • Children's Bureau**

For sale by the Superintendent of Documents, U.S. Government Printing Office
Washington 25, D.C. - Price 20 cents



contents

foreword.....	v
What Gangs Are and What They Are Not.....	2
Groups Have Many Meanings.....	2
<i>Groups are proving grounds</i>	3
<i>When a group means "protection"</i>	4
<i>When a group equals "danger"</i>	4
Groups Help Your Child To Grow.....	5
<i>Toward greater independence</i>	5
<i>Through healthy adventures</i>	6
<i>By learning to compromise</i>	7
<i>Toward masculinity and femininity</i>	8
<i>By supplying achievement and recognition</i>	8
<i>As he leaves childhood</i>	8
<i>When his group is almost his family</i>	9
<i>In getting along with the opposite sex</i>	9
<i>"Who am I?" "What am I good for?"</i>	10
<i>"One man in his time plays many parts"</i>	11
The Group Sets Its Code.....	12
<i>Bringing out what you have implanted</i>	13
<i>Putting a stop to backsliding</i>	13
Groups Take Many Forms.....	14
<i>Your neighborhood gives a cue</i>	14
<i>The rough and tumble of the play group</i>	15
<i>The fun of belonging to a crowd</i>	16
<i>A part in an interest group</i>	16
<i>Clubs cherish their secrets</i>	16
<i>Gang behavior—good and bad</i>	17
<i>Delinquent gangs present real dangers</i>	19
<i>Adult-sponsored programs</i>	19

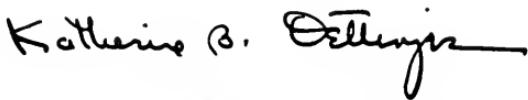
Does Every Child Need Groups?	20
<i>Two may be good company</i>	20
<i>When not being in a group is a "symptom"</i>	21
<i>How much companionship is "enough"?</i>	22
Avoiding the Hazards Groups May Present	22
<i>By supplying the courage to resist the group</i>	23
<i>By exploding the myth that "everybody else does"</i>	24
<i>By knowing when group allegiance is too strong</i>	24
<i>By preventing the alibi</i>	25
<i>By developing responsible behavior</i>	25
Your Interest Is an Extra Bonus	27
<i>Balancing freedom and supervision</i>	28
<i>What does it mean "to trust them"?</i>	29
<i>The road to parental controls</i>	30
<i>Your hospitality to children's friends pays off</i>	31
<i>Keep it the children's show</i>	32
<i>Good leadership brings out strengths</i>	33

foreword

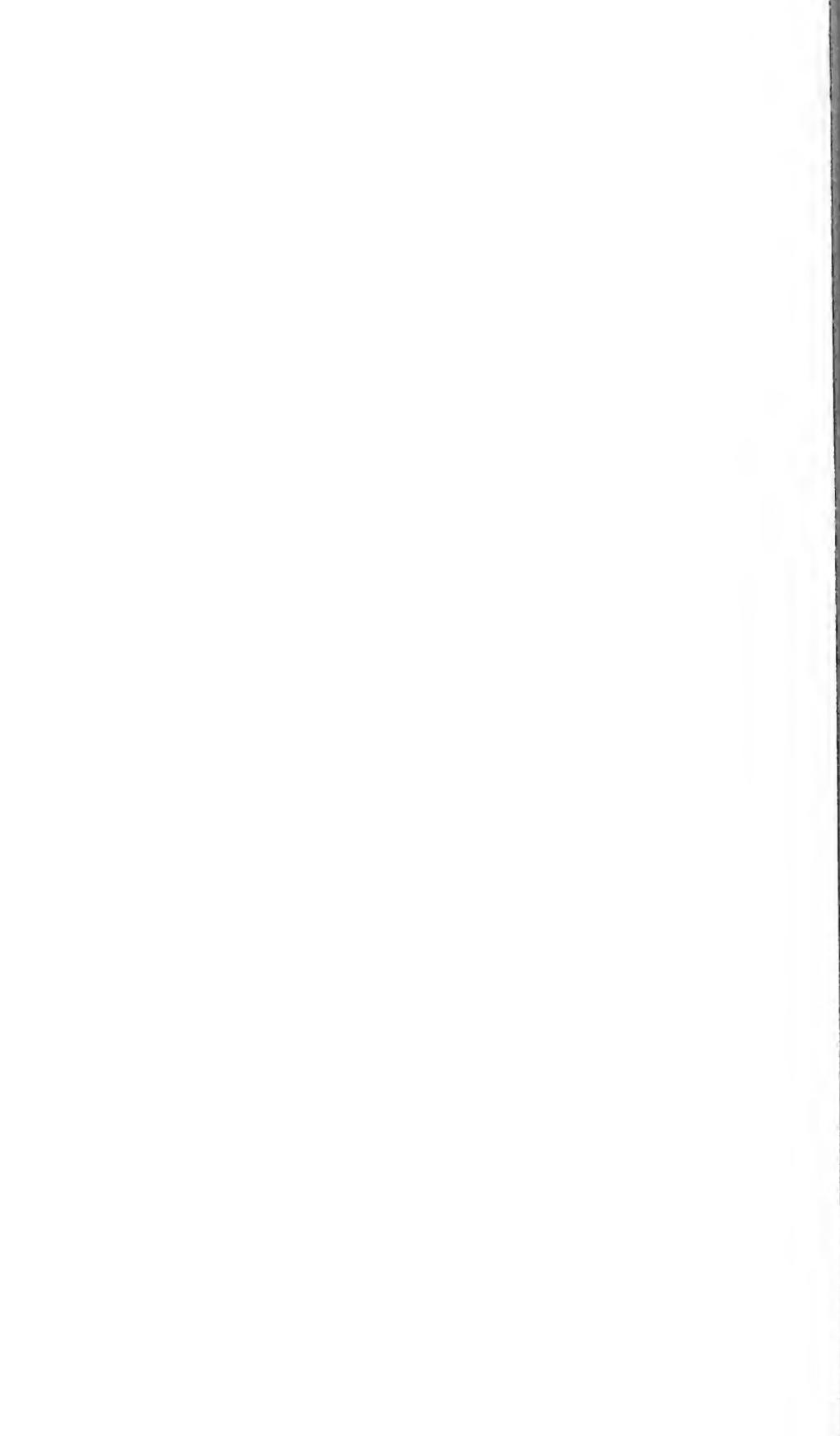
WHEN PARENTS of today were growing up, belonging to a "gang" was as wholesome as an "Our Gang" comedy. In more recent years, the gangs of delinquent city youth have erased some of the normal satisfactions associated with the word "gang." Today's parent may even take on a troubled look when his youngster relates something that his "gang" has been doing. But with children, at various ages and for various reasons, the need for being intimately a part of a gang, a group, a club, or a crowd of their own, is almost universal.

In response to the concern that parents often express about the groups their children belong to, the Children's Bureau arranged to have this publication written. It is an attempt to give parents fresh insight into why their youngsters will give their greatest interest and even loyalty to a gang or club at some periods and seem to become almost strangers in their own homes. Readers will find an explanation of why one child finds satisfaction in a highly structured organization while another is happiest with a little gang of his neighborhood friends. The publication also endeavors to answer common questions of parents as to how they can help, guide, participate in, or grant freedom to the child in belonging to a group or groups of his own choice. With added understanding, parents may be able to feel more relaxed when their child is with the "gang," better able to contribute in a positive way to the child's experience, and able to decide what definite limits are to be set upon behavior.

The authors consulted a variety of expert opinion in writing *Your Children and Their Gangs*. Both of them are well recognized for their contributions to parent education. The Children's Bureau considers this pamphlet a valuable and timely addition to the popular list of publications for parents it has been developing over the years. Many parents, we believe, will feel grateful to the authors for the information and understanding reflected in these pages.



KATHERINE B. OETTINGER,
Chief, Children's Bureau.



your children and their gangs

For children between 10 and 15 years old, belonging to a group of children their own age is as important to them as breathing. Perhaps like most parents, you have often wondered what was going on in their gangs and clubs and crowds. You may have been troubled because your sons and daughters seemed to be too much influenced by a particular group.

You may worry that they will become involved with "bad company" or take part in neighborhood mischief you do not know about. You may have had the disconcerting thought, "What if my child belongs to one of those gangs whose behavior gets out of hand?"

You may have observed how important the opinion of his crowd has become for your boy or girl who only a short while ago made you his confidant and took your word as final. Perhaps, without realizing it, you feel a bit hurt.

Or your concerns may have been in just the opposite direction. Perhaps you have felt your child is not taking part enough in groups of children of his own age.

In any event, you have been puzzled at times as to when you should step into the affairs of your youngster's club or gang. How can you offer the guidance boys and girls need, and which occasionally they even admit they want, without going against their own ideas of proper parental behavior?

The point of view of this pamphlet is that happy group experiences are basic to the development of well-balanced personalities. Through being part of a group, children learn lessons in living which they learn in no other way.

When parents understand what a child's gangs and crowds and clubs mean to him and how being part of a group contributes to his

growing, they are better able to weigh the situations that arise as children experiment in getting along together. Then parents can more readily decide whether to take a hand in what is going on or to sit back and enjoy that period in development called adolescence which comes to every child—but only once!

What Gangs Are and What They Are Not

Not so long ago, the word “gang” was used with kindly feeling. “That Old Gang of Mine” and “Hail, Hail, the Gang’s All Here” were songs that brought happy memories. “A gang” simply meant any group of people who banded together.

Teenagers still use it in this meaning. To them “a gang” is a particular group with special—but not necessarily objectionable—features of its own. Clubs, crowds, gangs, and bands of friends are some of the varied types of groupings in which youngsters come together. This is also the way “gang” is used in this pamphlet.

More recently, the word has taken on a sinister meaning in some quarters. Unfortunately, “gang” has become linked with delinquency. Yet there is nothing in the word itself to imply lawlessness—usually it does not carry this meaning for young people.

The form of the group does not in itself make it desirable or undesirable for a boy or girl. What counts are the aims, the quality of the relationships, and the behavior of the individuals. Together they make a fortunate or unfortunate group or gang—one which is orderly or one which may perhaps tend toward mischief or even lawbreaking.

Groups Have Many Meanings

A group may stand for something different to each of its members, or to any child at different times. Last year, just being in a stamp club gave Joey the feeling of belonging and being “all right.” This year he is more sure of himself and of his place with the other four boys in the group. When they are trading stamps, sending for catalogs and bringing albums up to date, the others frequently turn to Joey for advice. Now the club means “being important” as well as “having fun with a stamp collection.” As a big fish in a little pond, he acquires a backlog of self-confidence to



support him when he plays baseball with the bigger boys on the block.

A group may stand for an escape from the world of adults. Mothers tell teenagers to wear rubbers in wet weather. Fathers demand they get top grades. Teachers restrict their impulse to be noisy. To an 11- or a 13-year-old, however, his own gang is often a haven from these unwanted attentions.

Groups are proving grounds

In some parts of the world, elder members of a tribe initiate adolescent boys into the society of adults through a series of trials and rituals. If the boy comes through creditably, he is received as a full-fledged member of the community. That day he becomes a man. Among those who undergo the ceremony together, there is a lasting bond.

In the United States, no such tests separate the men from the boys. Yet the initiation, the hazings, the trials of strength and fortitude, or the knowledge of secret matters required for admission to some clubs and gangs have some of the same quality as the old tribal rituals. They show the need young males often have to prove themselves. "If you won't test us, we'll test ourselves," seems to be the meaning of these antics. Although the group members who set them up are not aware of their significance, they remind us of the importance of finding useful, gratifying ways for a boy to prove his competence.

Girls also insist on initiations into some of their secret societies, but these rarely carry such emotional weight. Showing that you are a strong, brave man in our world is necessary for male self-esteem. You prove yourself a woman in other ways such as being popular and attractive. These qualities are the ticket of admission to many a girls' group.

When a group means "protection"

The preteen or teenage boy or girl whose ambitions are not exactly like those of his fellows may feel he is odd. He may be bored or lonely. If he can gather a few sympathetic spirits around him, he gains protection from his own doubts about himself. In a certain big city high school, being a good student was looked down on and going on to college was the exception rather than the rule. A handful of girls had set their sights on a university with stiff entrance requirements. They were considered "squares" by the rest of the students. But because they were a little band of friends, each could overcome the feeling of being left out or odd.

Sometimes belonging offers physical safety, as in the case of Ben. "It's pretty hard to get along without belonging to a gang," he said. "If you don't belong, you don't have anybody to look out for you or stick up for you if you get in trouble." In a housing project with some unfriendly groups present, Ben had an acute need for "someone to stick up for him."

A group can also provide protection to the child from his own easily aroused conscience. The timid or too-protected child—and there are more of them than you might think—finds the courage to be more daring than he would be on his own. In a group he feels safe enough to try out a diving board or make smalltalk with girls.

When a group equals "danger"

Quite the other way, a group may represent a threat by ex-

posing an individual to actual danger or putting him in a position where carefully built up convictions about right and wrong are challenged. Pete is a sensitive 15-year-old who has finally cut loose from a jazz band he belonged to. Pete liked his fellow musicians and enjoyed playing with them but the band began to play in places of shady reputation, where temptations to gamble and to drink excessively were present. Pete did not want to become like some of the people he saw in these places. He was working hard to become something better.

An extremely insecure boy or girl, however, may be so afraid of failing to measure up to what would be expected of him in a group that he will have none of it. Fear may take the form of scorn. Kathy "wouldn't be caught dead with that moldy crew in the Hi-Girls Club." Actually she was afraid she would be inferior to the other girls in appearance and accomplishments.

Groups Help Your Child To Grow

One part of growing into adulthood is growing away from childhood. For this to happen, the child's inner needs must be met and he must struggle to move ahead in growing up. By the time he is 10, a youngster has learned much about getting along at home, at school, and with his friends. He knows quite well what is expected of him although he does not always do it. He has had experience with people in groups, but gangs and clubs composed of youngsters his own age, managing their own affairs and demanding that all members stand on their own feet, are just beginning to loom large on his horizon.

Toward greater independence

Ten-, eleven-, and twelve-year-olds need to grow away from depending completely on their parents toward greater self-reliance. One of the ways this comes about is through forging stronger bonds with those of their own age. That these youngsters are trying to free themselves from adults, particularly their own mothers and fathers, is hard for parents to take. Understanding that this turning toward the society of their own age mates is a sign of children's growth, not a sign of lack of gratitude or affection for their parents, takes the sting out of it.

As boys and girls reach out toward young friends who talk their own language, they tend to feel, often unfairly, that their

parents "don't understand them." As a result, like Booth Tarkington's Penrod,¹ they sometimes seem remote and unreachable. ". . . Penrod had come into his twelfth year wearing an expression carefully trained to be inscrutable. Since the world was sure to misunderstand everything, mere defensive instinct prompted him to give it as little as possible to lay hold upon. Nothing is more impenetrable than the face of a boy who has learned this. . . ."

For a child, a first step in loosening his close ties to his family is the realization that his parents are not the only people who have the answers. This, too, is hard for a parent to take.

Boys and girls have tender consciences. If the situation is complicated by their parents' hurt feelings, then tension between the two generations is likely to arise.

The child of even the wisest and most devoted of parents may announce to his cronies, "Is my mother ever the dopiest!" It is a distinct relief to him to have his companions declare that they, too, suffer from unreasonable, old-fashioned, and "dopey" female relatives. That these same adults, so scornfully dismissed by their young, are counted model citizens by the general public is of no account in the reckoning of the preadolescents.

This kind of support from the gang gives the youngster the chance and the strength to test out his ability to resist adults in the company of his comrades in reasonably safe ways. Just because they are questioning adult authority and are somewhat frightened, these youngsters tend to submit almost blindly to the dictates of their groups.

Surprisingly enough, rules laid down by the group are seldom as far removed from the standards of the grownups as they sometimes seem. Bill's father had received sullen looks when he scolded his son for using "bad" language in every sentence. The next Saturday, his father heard Bill announce to his friends, "Hey, you guys, we ought to have a rule against swearing in this gang." There was a murmur of agreement. Somebody said they had such a rule in his brother's club. Somebody else said, "At least no dirty talk in public."

Through healthy adventures

A youngster's efforts to find independence and adventure meet with success most readily in a group. When youngsters build a shack for a clubhouse or put on a circus, both young and old are pleased. But sometimes these attempts slip over the border into mischief. From behind the trim shrubbery of a well-kept suburban

¹ *Penrod, His Complete Story*, by Booth Tarkington. New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1931, 590 pp. (p. 3).



home as well as on a drab city street, a tomato may be hurled at a stout and unsuspecting matron. An empty house is broken into. A telephone number is dialed at random. "Are you the woman who washes?" . . . "You aren't? Well, then you must be awful dirty." The four girls who made the call go into gales of laughter.

Granting that mischief often does occur in groups, parents may be able to keep themselves from being upset if they realize what an important part groups play in a child's growth. Then parents can deal with youngsters' behavior that they consider harmful, not just by putting a stop to it but by looking for other ways for children to assert their independence and discover adventure.

By learning to compromise

A boy or girl may have been "only playing" all afternoon with his friends. Yet when a mother suggests that helping with supper or taking the dog for a walk is in order, the reply is, "Can't I ever have any peace?" or "I'm too tired." There may be good reasons behind these complaints. Two or three hours of giving in when necessary, persuading the other faction to meet him halfway, keeping the dissatisfied from quitting altogether, not to mention keeping his own temper under the pressure of heckling, can be as wearing to a 10- or a 13-year-old as hours spent in a business conference or a PTA committee meeting would be to his elders. In their groups, children learn how our world handles its affairs, and that is an important lesson indeed.

Techniques of getting along with others are among the tasks to be mastered during the preadolescent years—a learning process that began in early childhood. These can be best learned in a group. The boy or girl who achieves some skill in this direction before adolescence is under less strain in his relationship with others during the teen years.

Toward masculinity and femininity

A preadolescent needs to form a clear picture of himself as a boy or of herself as a girl. What are boys supposed to be good at? How are they expected to behave? What may a girl do or not do? How does it feel to be a girl? These are deeply felt questions although they may never be put into words. In groups of one sex, children watch each other's behavior and come to some useful conclusions.

In the preadolescent years, in spite of uncertain and often unhappy attempts at boy-girl parties, at dating, and at going steady, each sex regards the other with scorn or suspicion much of the time. They tend to draw apart—if they are not pushed together—as if to gather strength for what lies ahead. But that does not mean each sex does not enjoy and profit from talking *about* the other.

Early male gallantry and feminine allure can wear the heavy disguise of name calling, snowball and overripe apple throwing, and a vigorous denial of any good in the opposite sex.

By supplying achievement and recognition

The later grade school years are the time for increasing skill in using muscles and for learning new games, sports, and crafts. The activities that go on in groups devoted to athletics or hobbies often lead a youngster to do more practicing and become more expert than any adult urging could. The group provides both the motive and the atmosphere for developing new accomplishments, even though these are not always in line with what parents and teachers recommend.

Every human being needs recognition. Along with cutting him down to size with frank, and frequently blunt criticism, his gangs and crowds confer on a youngster the approval he longs for and the belief that he is an acceptable person.

As he leaves childhood

Your son's or daughter's bodily growth slowed down during the early grade school years. Around the age of 10 or 11 for girls,

a year or 2 later for boys, wrists begin to dangle out of sleeves. Hands and feet appear to be too big for the bodies to which they are attached. This spurt in growing is the forerunner of those inner and outer signs of physical maturing which mark the start of adolescence. The ups and downs in moods and in energy are just as upsetting to the boy or girl and to those around him as are the changes in shape, size, and voice. Now comes a push toward adulthood urged on by the young person's physical and mental development and by the pressures of his entire world. During the teen years, he gradually completes the task of becoming a person in his own right with less and less dependence on his parents.

When his group is almost his family

During adolescence some of the devotion, which children up to this time had given exclusively to their parents, begins to be distributed to the clubs, crowds, and gangs which are so dear to them. The group becomes a bridge for the journey from childhood love for parents to the more mature relationships of adulthood which involve giving as well as receiving. Indeed, one way groups foster the development of personality is that they introduce young people to situations in which demands are made upon them by their fellows.

In the intense friendships of a small group of girls in their teens, for instance, they turn to each other. A few years earlier each would have turned to her mother to confide, to complain, and to be comforted.

In getting along with the opposite sex

Another essential task for the adolescent is to learn to get along with the opposite sex. One-sex groups make a contribution toward boys' and girls' understanding of one another and toward their feeling at ease with one another, too.

Mothers often reproach their daughters, half in amusement, half in exasperation, with the question, "Can't you and your friends talk about anything but boys?" Actually these endless "He said . . . and then she said" conversations serve a purpose. Daydreaming aloud about "What kind of man would you marry if you could choose anyone in the world?" or "Who do you think is the greatest dreamboat (or the worst drip) in our class?" makes more sense than anyone listening to this chatter might think. Through these conversations, girls get a clearer idea of what is considered acceptable behavior for them and for the boys. By their endless talk, they give each other courage to take steps in winning a boy's favor.

Boys also reach some rather definite conclusions about girls in their bull sessions. Boasting about deeds they actually would not dare to do makes them feel they are capable of attracting girls.

A group of girls may plan a party or an excursion to which they invite their heroes of the moment. A group of boys may attempt an outing or a dance and invite girls; usually the girls are given bids as individuals and not as a group. Each boy draws support from the others and becomes less bumbling through the joint efforts of the group. This is not the same as the ongoing mixed group working together as a unit on projects, which is often not the success adult leaders hope it will be for those in their early teens.

"Who am I?" "What am I good for?"

Back of all these jobs in growing is a more difficult and deeper one for the adolescent—finding out what kind of person he is, what he has to contribute to others, what he needs from them, what he is good at, how far he can rely on himself, and also what he must make up his mind to *not* becoming.

The first step is the discovery of “Who am I really?” and taking a proper pride in the feeling, “I am a female,” or “I am a male.” Boys need to convince themselves that they are capable of living up to what is considered masculine. In their crowds and gangs, they set up tests and standards to assure themselves that by comparison with their fellows they measure up. Here again their idle talk serves a purpose for it helps fill in their picture of what they will be like as men.

“Grooming clubs” in which girls practice new hairdo’s and exchange tips on increasing their attractiveness define one phase of the femininity they are trying to establish. Programs such as the Scouts, the Y’s, and the Camp Fire Girls offering awards for child care, housekeeping, or service to the sick or the aged are an incentive to try out another side of the feminine personality.

Competence is all important to boys and girls in their teens. They can only feel they are good *for* something when they feel they are good *at* something. This discovery of self is accompanied by doubts and anxieties, by conflicts within themselves and with others. Teenagers want to give up being children, but they cannot let go of what they were in the past until they know fairly clearly what they will become in the future.

Adolescents are always trying to still their doubts of their own worth. “I wouldn’t be so bad if I only had nice eyes, would I?” asks Marilyn. Agreement from someone whose opinion she values does not completely convince her that “Nobody, but nobody, has such glamorous eyes.” Growing self-confidence which comes about through

good experience is the best cure to those self-doubts which are so typical of youth.

These and other stocktakings and comparisons help children to decide what they value and how to make good choices. Through such discussions young persons are helped to weigh their place in the group which is a first step to finding out their own worth in other situations.

Crowds often choose a model who may be an adult leader or some well-known figure such as a TV or film actor, or each member may have a model of his or her own. A vast amount of agreeing and disagreeing about the merits of their common or particular idols takes place. Looking down on what and on whom they admired last year is a favorite way for the group to measure, and reassure itself about, the progress of its members. Without anyone planning that it should happen, the crowd or the club is helping its members' search to define where they stand and what they stand for.

"One man in his time plays many parts"

A youngster is also helped to find himself by trying out dif-



ferent roles in a group. The girl or boy in the early teens can test out being follower or leader, clown or worldly-wise man, fall guy or idea man, in much the same way in which he might try on someone's clothes. Perhaps he plays one part in one group, and another in another. Gradually he finds out which role is the most fun and works out best for him and his group in the long run.

Since adolescents value a different set of traits from those which the younger children admire, often a sharp change occurs in the parts any one child plays in the years from 10 to 15, although for a time a child may seem to be frozen into a particular role.

The leader who is merely a boss and who imposes his will on the others may thrive briefly with a group. He will be less successful in leadership than one who senses the goals of the group and helps it achieve them.

Listen to the nicknames your children and their friends get in their gangs and clubs and you will learn much about the roles to which they have been assigned. "The Moose" is brawn and not much brain. "The Brain" is the smart one. "Mouse" is quick and perhaps crafty. The children themselves set great store by these nicknames even though they are no more flattering than "Stinky," "Fats," or "Yak-Yak."

The name of a club may reflect the common purpose or the common situation of its members. Half-a-dozen junior-high girls, drawn together by a lack of attention from boys, spent an afternoon selecting their club name. After considering "The Beatniks," "The Subdebs," "The Snowdrops," "The Yakety-Yaks," "The Checkeredboards" (squares!), each of which suggested some aspect of their hopes and their frustrations—they finally decided to call themselves "The Destitutes."

The Group Sets Its Code

As a parent you have undoubtedly been teaching your pre-adolescent son or daughter for a good many years what is and what is not acceptable behavior. If you have occasionally grown discouraged, you might take heart if you listened to the rules of his gang. The rules children formulate for themselves are often a far stricter version of what parents have been trying to impose. There is wisdom in children. If they set themselves standards far too high for 10- or 12-year-old flesh and blood to maintain, they also give

themselves a safety valve as did the 10-year-old girls in this club whose rules were quoted in *The New Yorker*:²

1. Do not tell a white lie unless necessary.
2. Do not hurt anyone in any way.
3. Do not hit anyone except Ronny.
4. Do not tell a black lie.
5. Do not use words worse than "brat."
6. Do not curse at all.
7. Do not make faces except at Ronny.
8. Do not be selfish.
9. Do not make a hog or a pig of yourself.
10. Do not tattle except on Ronny.
11. Do not steal except from Ronny.
12. Do not destroy other people's property, except Ronny's.
13. Do not be a sneak.
14. Do not be grumpy except to Ronny.
15. Do not answer back except to Ronny.

Bringing out what you have implanted

One's heart would go out to Ronny who would seem to be the scapegoat, except for the fact that the girls set up these rules in a tongue-in-cheek mood. Although the girls may be "mean to Ronny," they seem to be saying it is possible to be well behaved to the rest of the world. In the main this set of statements shows that, little by little, the girls have incorporated their parents' standards into their own consciences. Not that they always live up to these standards! That would be asking too much!

In their clubs and crowds and gangs, children discover that some rules are necessary if their entire time together is not to be spent in bickering and name calling. Group life forces them to sort out, judge, sharpen, and put into words the principles their parents have implanted.

Putting a stop to backsliding

For the adolescent, his crowd or club or gang takes over the task of cautioning him for which he formerly looked to his parents. If someone behaves in an intolerably childish way, he is told, "Aw,

² By permission © 1954, *The New Yorker Magazine, Inc.*

be your age!" That is likely to put a stop to behavior he knows is unworthy of a 14-year-old.

The group is often skillful at disciplining itself. Its code may not be as much along the lines of adult teachings as was that of the anti-Ronny club. Yet the very setting up of a code tends to further an understanding of what is frowned upon and what is accepted.

Groups Take Many Forms

The practical aspects of crowds, clubs, and gangs are also interesting. How do informal groups of playmates, crowds, clubs, and groups sponsored by adults differ from each other in the way they operate and in the demands they make upon their members? What are the differences in makeup of groups of younger and of older children?

Both preadolescents and adolescents tend to form groups of their own age and sex. These groups take similar forms among the older and younger boys and girls, but each carries on its activities in its own way.

Membership in groups of younger children often shifts from week to week, although the same three or four sometimes stay close friends for long periods. Usually 10- and 12-year-olds favor small groups of from three to six or perhaps eight individuals. Adolescent groups may be considerably larger and tend to be more durable.

As a rule, members of a preteen group are not more than a year apart in age, but an age span of as much as 3 or even 5 years may occur among members of an adolescent group. While younger children belong for the sake of belonging, older ones are more interested in what is going on and who is involved. Among the preadolescents who band together for no stated or lofty purpose, leadership is less often centered in one individual. The teenagers often have aims which run the gamut from saving humanity to enjoying themselves with emphasis most often falling on the latter.

Young people in their teens sometimes ask for adult guidance. Preadolescents usually want nothing more than to conduct their games and their arguments, hatch their own schemes, and plan their own activities without interference.

Your neighborhood gives a cue

The atmosphere and the customs of the community are a strong influence, though not the only ones, on the way a group behaves

and on its choice of activities. In a law-abiding neighborhood with a settled, stable population that does not condone violence, one or two troublemakers usually cannot sway the whole crowd to out-of-bounds behavior day after day. Their "bad influence" tends to be counteracted by the spirit of the community.

If street fights and extreme rowdiness are met with shoulder shrugging from adults, one or two youngsters who try to keep the others out of mischief may have only a slim chance of making themselves heard.

The city or suburban child can step out of his door and find companions. A block or two on foot or bicycle will bring him to a gathering of young people. But when the schoolbus leaves a boy or girl at the R.F.D. box which marks the entrance to his family's farm or ranch or house in a semirural neighborhood, he may be quite a distance from neighbors and friends. Traffic on the highways makes walking to the neighbors' a real hazard. Then, too, the farm-child often has chores and necessary jobs to do in the late afternoon.

What he misses in quantity, the youngster who lives in the country may make up in the quality of his group life. Hills and valleys, ponds and streams invite exploration and offer space and material for treehouses and hiding places which are the particular delight of 10- and 12-year-olds. For the teenagers, the 4-H Clubs provide a sense of purpose and of being valued by adults which city boys and girls less frequently experience. Neither city nor country children have all the advantages. Their group life is simply different.

The rough and tumble of the play group

The neighborhood play group of the preadolescent finds its happy hunting ground on city streets and playgrounds, in suburban backyards and empty lots (if any are to be found), or in the woods and fields of a rural community. Such a group often includes several pairs of best friends but usually no real organization exists. It is likely to be the "Hey, Skinn-ey, c'mon over" type of association. In a rough way—and rough may be taken in both senses of the word—these children have their own methods of handling quarrels, making rules, and establishing some limits beyond which even the boldest will not go. A fierce loyalty marks their relationship, but sometimes kindness does not.

How such a group spends its time is described in *The Unpersuaded* by Louise Field Cooper. They only wanted ". . . on their bicycles to dart in their flock over the narrow point roads or, when the inclination came, suddenly to abandon the bicycles and pass a whole morning immobile in a tree, or on the green grass under it.

They didn't want to be entertained, or supervised; . . . Sometimes they would . . . write some dimly understood short word on a wooden wall . . . they played their own games . . . games with no beginnings and unresolved ends that petered out in a morass of giggles."³

In this kind of gathering you are accepted if you live up to what the others expect of you and if you do not run to an adult when you get into trouble with your companions.

The fun of belonging to a crowd

For the older boy or girl, the counterpart of the neighborhood play group is the high school crowd. Crowds do not have a set plan or purpose. Usually they include 15 to 20 members, with perhaps several pairs of best friends. Crowds are marked by a grapevine system of communication which a first-class spy ring might envy. Even though many youngsters within a crowd go steady, 14- and 15-year-olds still maintain their interest in a crowd of their own sex.

A part in an interest group

A taste for baseball or backgammon, for collecting butterflies or ballad recordings, rather than a warm regard for each other often brings youngsters together in an interest group. Sometimes a group, limited to the number of youngsters needed for the game or the activity, may flourish among the teens or the preteens.

Often they are brought together by an adult. A father who enjoys woodworking or photography or a mother who likes to paint or to knit may gather a group of boys or girls who are interested and help them acquire a skill. Sometimes the boys or girls will ask for meeting space, equipment, and leadership from a community center, boys' club or settlement house. Or a recreational worker in a church or neighborhood center, seeing a number of children at loose ends, may look for some common ground on which to draw them into a constructive activity.

Clubs cherish their secrets

A youngster is sure he is *in* when he has something to say about keeping someone else *out*. The joys of sharing a secret may be one reason why both younger and older boys and girls are so eager to belong to a club. The feature of a club that makes it different from other groups is that it has officers, rules, a definite time and place for meeting. Frequently, it has also a stated purpose and dues—not that

³ From a story by Louise Field Cooper in *The New Yorker*.

the purpose is invariably carried out or the dues always paid. Its signs and passwords are not to be revealed on pain of being thrown out, and an "all for one, one for all" unity prevails.

Elaborate codes of behavior, like those of the girls who were anti-Ronny, among the younger children serve to ease feelings of guilt about having secrets from their parents. What is guarded as a secret is kept private, not so much for fear of disapproval of the secret itself, but rather to test the members.

Gang behavior—good and bad

Preteen or teenage boys who belong to delinquent gangs are not for that reason alone lawbreakers, nor are all street gangs engaged in lawbreaking. The delinquent gang is a group of young people who see destruction and attack as their only way of hitting back at society. The real problem is not that delinquent gangs exists, but that so many young people feel that society has no use for them—that everyone is against them.

The sign of the delinquent gang is the almost blind loyalty between its members. A gang may have anywhere from 6 to 30 members, but no doubt exists about who belongs and who is excluded.



When he who is *in* is a friend, and he who is *out* is, by definition, a foe, a highly flammable situation is created. True, clubs also have well defined membership. But in this instance, although nonmembers may be looked down on, they are not looked upon as potential invaders or aggressors. A club, too, differs from a delinquent gang in that it takes out its desires to prove its superiority to another club through such avenues as competitive games or other activities.

The delinquent gang differs, too, from the group of boys who hang around a particular street corner, but lack aims and organization. The "corner boys" are more like a crowd. They do nothing much together except "wait for something to happen." They are not interested in getting into fights for they have nothing in common to defend.

The delinquent gang usually has a name, the more fearsome the better. Its hangout may be a "snack and grill" with a bad reputation, or a street corner. Some uniform or emblem worn by or tattooed on its members is customary. Gang laws are no less firm for being unwritten and the gang's control over members is no less strict for being understood. The leader reigns by common consent rather than by being elected. Each member plays a well understood part, though parts are rarely assigned formally. Communication is as effective as the messages drummed out by a tribe in the African bush and no more understandable to an outsider.

Sometimes a gang's purpose is nothing more than to while away the time together. Hanging around and waiting for something to happen; taunting one another or passersby; boasting and rough-housing may fill hours on end among any collection of adolescents, but for the delinquent gang it becomes a career! Some of these gangs exist for the purpose of keeping a rival gang out of the neighborhood, "borrowing" cars, or destroying property. In neighborhoods where adult feelings run high between racial and nationality groups, these gangs can take up the pattern of looking on any minority as a menace.

Some delinquent gangs require trials of strength or endurance for admission, but in most instances knowing someone who is "in," being the right age, and most of all not being of the group or district of any rival gang is sufficient qualification for membership. A likely looking fellow is frequently drafted into membership because of his physical prowess, athletic ability, or personal possessions. He may be afraid to refuse, no matter how little he welcomes the invitation.

Girls rarely form typical delinquent gangs though they may be on the fringe of one as a sort of "ladies auxiliary." The willingness to fight and the general swashbuckling that mark the typical delinquent gang member are proof of maleness. The values of the gang are not especially appealing to girls, although the boys who



hold these values are. A group of younger children who tag along and copy the behavior of the teenagers is also a frequent part of the gang pattern.

Delinquent gangs present real dangers

A small clique, an individual, or even a name carrying great prestige may be the rallying point for a miscellaneous and shifting band of youngsters of assorted ages in a delinquent gang. They may not even all know each other, although each is in communication with the individual or the clique at the core. Such a group may vary in size from 20 to 200.

Defense is the only purpose of this combination. Let a crisis be brewing and members appear to fight they know not for what, against they know not exactly whom. A kaleidoscopic group may exist around the edges of a gang and enlarge its ranks when trouble breaks out. This is "the mob" that is justifiably alarming to adults because its unpredictable behavior so often gets out of control.

Adult-sponsored programs

Groups planned and led by adults differ from the spontaneous groupings of preteens and teenagers. Boy and Girl Scouts, Camp Fire Girls, Boys' Club of America branches, Hi Y's, 4-H Clubs, and Woodcrafters have programs outlined by national headquarters for preadolescent and adolescent boys and girls. Churches, community centers, and settlement houses also sponsor adult-led groups.

Goals and principles are clearly stated, and the national organizations' requirements for membership to be met and ranks to be achieved for faithful performance of duties are part of the program. Uniforms and dues, however modest, impress young people.

Activities and rituals have been carefully worked out by adults and are excellent in principle. But just because a group is under the wing of a nationwide organization does not automatically guarantee that it will meet the needs of every boy or girl at every point in his development.

From the experiences of your own sons and daughters, you have probably discovered that one child at a particular time thrives best in the rather spontaneous and formless collection of companions, while another is happier in a situation in which a well-defined program is followed. Children's needs and tastes vary from year to year. Probably the most fortunate child is he who has some experiences in a variety of groups as he is growing up.

Does Every Child Need Groups?

Few persons are so sociable that they never want privacy. Yet some boys and girls are seldom part of a group. This comes about not because they are excluded, but because, as far as the adults around them can tell, they prefer to spend their free time alone or with one friend. In order to decide whether this is a sign that something needs to be done for them or is merely an indication of being on their own, their resistance to being eager mixers needs to be fitted into the jigsaw puzzle of their entire personalities.

There are many good things in life besides being in a group, as the achievements of those who never belonged to a crowd or a club as children will prove. Yet every child who is indifferent to the company of his contemporaries is not for that reason a potential genius.

Two may be good company

One youngster may not be taking part in groups, but he may have a close friend with whom he pursues his interests. They may both be lively people who are friendly enough with all comers but who do not seem to want a larger circle. Neither of them needs to be the type of popular young person who is the life of the party, the president of the class, and, generally, the all-American boy or girl.

As they are growing up, youngsters need friends of the same sex. A pair of best friends contribute to each other's ability to be understanding and generous in any relationship. Because of the early age boys and girls attempt to "go steady," and because of the pressure to take part in groups, the pleasure of having a "best friend" of the same sex is in danger of fading out of children's lives. This is a real loss. Adults should not discourage these two-somes.

Too high a price may be paid by the child who tries to live up to his parents' ideal of the extremely sociable individual who is always the center of a group. The premium that is attached to popularity may put so much pressure on children who cannot or are not interested in achieving it that they become full of self-doubts and groundless fears.

The desire to take part in wider groups may come later, or a person may always be happier with a few close friends. Sometimes a person can be quite content to be alone, and yet bitterly lonely in a crowd. If your child is not an eager group member, he needs the support that comes from feeling his parents approve of him as he is.

When not being in a group is a "symptom"

There is all the difference in the world between the young person who spends his time happily and constructively alone or with one friend, and the boy or girl who only wants to sit by himself in front of the television set or next to the radio. Sometimes such a youngster is under too much pressure at school and at home. He retreats to TV programs to gather his strength. If the demands on him are eased, he may have the energy to do something active and to make friends. Such a child might be afraid of other children or just ill at ease with them. Perhaps he needs some help in learning the games and the skills that children of his age enjoy.

Being in a noncompetitive group, where an activity is more important than the relationship with other children, may get him started toward the mild amount of group life that he would enjoy. The craft shop or hobby room in a community center or other recreational setup may often be the entering wedge for a child who is not entirely comfortable with those of his own age. It is also sometimes the beginning of better things for the child who feels that other children exclude him.

Now suppose that this 10- or 12- or 14-year-old who avoids groups is also listless, discontented, angry, or belligerent most of the time. Or suppose he is not able to learn in school or is full of fears that interfere with his daily living. Then not caring about

groups would be only one of a number of signs that he needed help. The kind of help such a young person needs can most readily be given by the school guidance counselor, the family doctor, a family service, a child welfare agency, or a mental health or child guidance clinic.

How much companionship is "enough"?

Granted that adolescents, especially, need privacy sometimes and can profit by developing the inner resources that make it possible to be content alone, still it is not easy for parents to decide whether a boy or girl is getting the companionship he needs. The behavior of the youngster who has little interest in groups is often puzzling, particularly if other members of the family are markedly sociable.

In trying to determine whether a young person's indifference to being with a number of others springs from a robust self-confidence and self-reliance or whether it stems from anxiety and unsureness about himself, parents can consider whether he has the feeling other people like him and whether he returns that feeling. If a boy or girl is reasonably cheerful much of the time, and has a lively curiosity about the world around him, this is a good sign. If he usually spends his free time actively and constructively, this too points to his emotional well-being. Most revealing of all is his ability, or lack of ability, to find companionship when he wants it.

Some children are so weighed down with extra lessons, pressure to excel in school, or responsibility for the care of younger brothers or sisters that they have scant time to cultivate a group no matter how eager they are to do so.

The nongroup-minded boy or girl may be one of those who will develop deep, lasting relationships with a few people all through life. He may actually be more mature than those who can never endure being alone.

Avoiding the Hazards Groups May Present

Groups do at times present some hazards, in spite of the contribution they make to healthy personality. A youngster can become too deeply involved in a crowd or club or gang. Parents often complain that their children care too much for the good opinion of their friends, and they are so afraid of differing from them that the parents' standards carry little weight. Parents can usually prevent such an overdose of group influence.



By supplying the courage to resist the group

Boys and girls who grow up in homes where parents are sturdy individuals absorb the lesson that a person can, when the situation demands it, act according to what he feels is right or what works out best for the family, even though it is not what the neighbors are doing. This does not mean being different merely for the sake of being different, nor does it mean being indifferent to the customs of the community.

Example is still the best, if not the only way, to impress on the young that a degree of independence *from* a group can at times be as useful as the ability to adapt oneself *to* it. We live in a world where being a poor sport or an "odd ball" is just one cut above being an out-and-out dangerous character. Preteens and teenagers especially are convinced that "I'll die, absolutely die, if I have to be different." Being "different" constantly *would* work a hardship on any youngster, but learning to resist total conformity may prove to be a saving grace.

If your 10-year-old has a cold and has to wear a cap when no one else is wearing one, or if your 14-year-old has to get along without a new jacket, "being different" will be more bearable if he sees that his parents understand his feelings about the importance of looking like his fellows, but that they know also there are other more important things in life.

By exploding the myth that "everybody else does"

It is part of healthy development to set a high value on doing just what others are doing at the age of 10 or 13 or 15. But developing beyond that stage and being able to stand up for what he believes is right in the face of opposition is necessary for the young person's own self-respect and emotional well-being. It takes years of growing to reach the point where a person is not swayed by the dictates of the crowd.

Parents can further that kind of growing as they deal with the plaint, "But everybody else in the crowd does!" One mother found that the stand, "I don't care about 'everybody else'; you are my child, and you can't do it," only made matters worse. Another mother tried a different approach. When one of her children insisted that "everybody" was allowed to do this or that, she would say, "Let's find out. You ask around and so will I. Maybe it isn't really everybody."

Of course the myth of "everybody else" or "the whole gang" melted away to only one or two, or perhaps nobody at all. Other parents were also being cowed with the "I'm absolutely the only one who isn't allowed to go," line of attack. Each member of the crowd, unwilling to admit his or her parents were protesting, added to the generally mistaken notion. Each believed all the others had parental consent. When one individual took the trouble to separate rumor from fact, the myth collapsed.

By knowing when group allegiance is too strong

Parents often wonder just how much group life is good for a boy or girl. "Chuck only comes home to eat and sleep," wails Chuck's mother. Chuck does come home for meals! He knows his parents will be concerned if he doesn't. True, he isn't very talkative at home, because his mind is on the baseball team or a party his club is giving. But home and parents are still important to him. No group takes their place, nor is Chuck too focused on his crowd.

The boy who has no roots and is in trouble with the authorities presents a different picture. For him, the gang is often his only tie to human beings. He feels that everyone else—family, teachers,

the police, and if he lives in a city, the social workers at the neighborhood center—looks upon him as hopeless. His parents, if they are around, are probably indifferent to whether he comes home to sleep or not, and nobody sits down to a meal anyway.

When a group partially takes the place of the family as the center of the young person's world, his need for the society of his contemporaries and for getting free from his family is probably being met in a healthy way. If the group, and in this case it is usually a gang of doubtful reputation, fills the space in a boy's life which was empty because he had no close ties to a family who cared for him, then the situation may be decidedly unhealthy.

In trying to judge whether a youngster's development is being advanced by his relationship with a group, parents should observe carefully what he does in a crowd or club and how he feels about his companions against the background of everything else he is doing and what the rest of his life is like.

By preventing the alibi

In considering the possible hazards in groups, we think of street lights that are smashed, buildings that are defaced, candy bars and trinkets that are lifted from counter displays. Stealing and vandalism do crop out in even the most respectable neighborhoods. The youngsters involved are not necessarily headed for delinquency, but such incidents cannot be taken lightly.

Since it is often impossible to say who was more and who was less at fault, a youngster may be tempted to deny any share in the group's mischief. He may become an expert denier and alibier. That is one of the unfortunate side effects of a group's misbehavior. A boy or girl may convince his parents, and almost persuade himself, that "Somebody else, not me" took the magazines off the newsstand or knocked down a picket fence.

If parents take the attitude that responsibility is to be shared, not shifted among members of the group, the child soon gets the idea that laying the blame on someone else is not going to be tolerated. A sense of responsibility for his own behavior and its results may grow slowly, but in the long run it is the real preventive of epidemics of destructiveness.

Then on the basis of the fact that everyone involved is to take care of the damage done, adults can deal with the misbehavior itself.

By developing responsible behavior

Parents help their children most by taking the side of law and conscience. When a youngster is in trouble, it is actually heart-

ening for him to hear from his father or mother, "This is wrong. Such goings-on have consequences from which nobody can protect you. Of course we'll stand by you, but that doesn't mean we think what you did was OK."

"Standing by" a child does not imply that parents protect him from any contact with law-enforcing authorities. To do so would underline the belief that "I can get away with it," which probably led to the incident in the first place. Standing by a child who is in trouble does not mean considering him an outcast or typing him as "a bad one" because of his escapades. It does mean letting bygones be bygones and not alluding to his misdemeanors or allowing others to taunt him with them. Of course the parent should not say, "Your brother never got into such a mess."



Standing by has an immediate and literal meaning as well. If visits to the police, the school authorities, or the court are necessary, parents need to be on hand.

In addition to the attitudes parents take within the family to assist a youngster in keeping his self-respect while admitting his actions, adults can take certain steps with the entire group to teach some sense of responsibility. Damages can be repaired by the youngsters' own efforts as well as through their own money which has been saved or earned. If what is stolen is still intact, it can be returned to its owner.

Bringing members of the group together with their parents and the merchants or householders against whom they have offended may highlight for heedless boys or girls the hardships their plundering works on others. Often a discussion of why the community cannot stand for such behavior makes a real impression. The children wake up to the fact that their behavior which seemed so daring and heroic was merely stupid and babyish.

In order to encourage responsible behavior, adults need to look at some of the possible causes for playing pranks and being destructive. The roots of such behavior are varied and depend both on the community and the individuals involved. There is no ready-made remedy. We do know some of the so-called remedies will neither put a stop to group misdemeanors nor develop more responsibility in young people. Breaking up a group or sending a ring-leader away rarely solves everything. Taking away such privileges as playing on a team or taking part in an organized activity may merely heighten a teenager's sense of pointlessness in his life.

Additional police protection, curfews, or other restrictions are at best only stopgaps. Least effective of all are measures to punish parents. Rather than thinking about what should be taken away from these young people, we might do well to ask ourselves: How can children be given the means of gaining satisfaction, recognition, and a sense of achievement, on which a sense of community and individual responsibility can be based?

Your Interest Is an Extra Bonus

Your first step in guiding boys and girls so that they may realize the promise in their groups is to gain an understanding of the needs of growing personalities, which this pamphlet has tried to set forth.

A second step is to state goals that seem reasonable to both parents and young people. Helping children find enjoyment in

their clubs, crowds, and gangs is probably basic. Furthering development of a child's ability to work and play with others, to understand himself and the people around him through his participation in groups is also a part of the aims of most parents. At the same time that adults want to see youngsters take part in group life, they hope their boys and girls will not slavishly follow any crowd or gang and that they do learn to rely on themselves and their own judgment. Blindly accepting the decisions of any group at any time of life does not make for the best emotional health in the individual or the best social atmosphere in the community.

Facing our own feelings about these groups of preadolescents and adolescents is a third step. When preteens or teens get together they want to have space, make a noise, try something new and, in general, stir things up. "Let's get the show on the road," is the cry.

No matter how young in heart we adults think we are, we would usually settle for domestic peace—it's wonderful! We are in favor of keeping things as they are and as tranquil as possible, at least for the moment or after a hard day's work.

We like to think of youth as the happiest time of life. We need to remember that just because young people face problems different from ours does not mean that they are any less serious to them than those of adults. When we grow weary of our own responsibilities, and we watch youngsters trooping off together, we feel, perhaps unconsciously, a twinge of envy.

Balancing freedom and supervision

Parents are often advised to give boys and girls the opportunity to make choices, decisions, and plans for themselves in their groups. At the same time, mothers and fathers are urged to keep a close watch on their children, to know where and with whom they are, and what they are doing. Actually, there is merit in both stands and nothing contradictory in practicing both in moderation.

No 10-, 12-, or 14-year-old is 100 percent reliable. They all need to have some limits set for them, and then within these limits to have freedom to exercise their own judgment. Young people actually are more comfortable when some limits are set up. Knowing this should give parents the courage to act the part of a more experienced, somewhat wiser, though not infallible person, capable of exerting control when that is called for. Every parent has at times to bear that dreadful accusation, "How antique can you get?" or "For heavens' sakes, don't make a noise like a mother!" or, worst of all, "You just don't want me to have any friends, do you?" usually followed by "Why do I always have to be the one to spoil the whole crowd's fun?"



Brief unpopularity with your son or daughter will not destroy the loving relationship of years even though it is unpleasant while it lasts. Neither will the observing of a reasonable restriction, with some leeway for unavoidable circumstances, cause a boy or girl to be excluded by his companions.

What does it mean "to trust them"?

It is not a sign of lack of trust on the part of parents to insist that an adult be present at boy-girl parties or that a responsible grown person accompany a group of girls who are going away together for a weekend. To trust a preadolescent or adolescent does not mean to leave him entirely to his own devices. As a parent, you know your own child and how much judgment he has. You can ask questions about "Where?" "With whom?" etc., without making it sound like a cross-examination.

Sometimes mothers and fathers find it difficult to have confidence in adolescents because of the scare headlines in the newspapers. Everything the parent's own experience tells him *might* happen in a group of young people tends to influence the picture of what is really taking place. It is well to base judgments of a group's behavior on what you *know* rather than on what you fear may be the state of affairs.

Children appreciate evidence of their parents' confidence in such matters as being granted the right to privacy, to have some secrets, to choose their own friends, and, to a great extent, the groups they will belong to—or stay out of. Then, if the occasion arises when parents feel that discouraging a child's membership in a particular group is really necessary, youngsters are more likely to pay attention.

Parents' dealings with the younger generation tend to go more smoothly if they bear in mind that conditions have changed in the last 20 or 30 years. "When I was your age, I never would have etc., etc.," is an argument that seldom convinces the young.

In groups just as with individuals, young people tend to live up to what is expected of them. They usually shape their actions on the mental picture of themselves which their parents have built up in them, perhaps quite unconsciously, through the years. Too often, they are shocked and hurt by the implication that they would do something seriously wrong.

The road to parental controls

An example of what parents can do when they take an interest and a firm stand is shown by the experience of one neighborhood in a large city. Most people had an acute struggle to make a bare living. Lawbreaking gangs had long been a problem. Groups of preadolescents already involved in undesirable behavior frequently applied to the neighborhood settlement house. They wanted to use its facilities for their clubs since clubs within the settlement had great prestige.

Parents of these youngsters faced many difficulties. For the most part, they had given up trying to control their children. And the conditions under which the families lived did not set a good example.

The settlement staff decided to ask the parents to come together as a group before the boys' club was granted permission to use the settlement house. Surprisingly enough, the high regard in which the settlement was held and the pressure from the youngsters combined to bring out most of the mothers and a few fathers as well.

When these parents understood what the boys needed, they made some effort to rebuild their relationship with them and to regain some control over them. The parents gained strength and resolution from each other.

Following a series of these meetings, a marked improvement



in the boys' behavior was apparent. Their interest in planning activities acceptable to the community increased and their lawlessness diminished. The children were pleased that adults in the neighborhood took an interest in their clubs and that they cared enough to want to regulate their behavior.

Of course the happy outcome of this story was brought about by a strong and sympathetic adult leadership in the settlement house. Still, it may give neighborhoods which do not have nearly so many hazards to contend with some good ideas.

Your hospitality to children's friends pays off

Knowing your children's friends is always good, but sensitive young people appreciate tact. As one father said, "When five girls begin to jabber about the movie they've seen or what went on at one

of their wingdings, you learn a lot about what kind of kids they are."

Encouraging your sons and daughters to bring the crowd home may be hard on furniture and the pantry as well as on your patience, but it is rewarding. If your house won't hold 10 youngsters, and there are 10 in the crowd at the moment, you may be able to help them find a suitable place to hang out.

An expression of approval of what the group is doing or of the people in it tends to take the sting out of comments on behavior when these are unavoidable.

Mothers who are active in PTA's, church groups, and other community organizations, have the opportunity to become acquainted with the parents of some of their children's friends in an easy, informal way. Such an acquaintance may offer useful clues as to what the children will be like. It may also provide a foundation of pleasant contacts which will be a help should the cooperation of these parents in making a common stand be wanted.

Parents who take a joint stand on hours to come home, places to go, and similar matters can be such a force that it is best to save this device for crises.

In one neighborhood where the mothers were too obvious about joint action, the girls felt they were being "ganged up on." A mild degree of rebelliousness flared into bitter revolt. At the suggestion of the guidance counselor in the school, a joint mother-daughter committee for the eighth grade was formed. When their elders stopped bearing down with all their force on every detail of dress and behavior and granted the girls a voice in their deliberations, the girls became less defiant.

Taking part as leader or sponsor in scout troops, church clubs, Camp Fire Girls' circles, or similar organizations is an excellent way for parents to keep in touch with the group life of their youngster. It may work out better if a mother or father is not the leader of his or her own child's troop or club.

If community recreation for young people is insufficient or entirely lacking, parents and young people can often work together to get what they need. A good way to begin is by finding out what the needs are and what group experiences are at present available. Such a search sometimes turns up valuable allies or resources that can be used.

Keep it the children's show

Giving a group assistance without taking matters out of the youngsters' hands calls for a nice restraint on the part of parents. Often a clue to how much and what kind of help they need can be gained by finding out what the boys or girls are trying to accomplish.

Half-a-dozen seventh graders consulted the mother of one of them about putting on a play. This mother knew that a finished performance is less important than what children learn along the way in any group undertaking. She helped the girls think about the kind of play they could stage and then let them go in search of one that appealed to them.

When her aid was required with costumes and scenery, she contributed an idea or two. She followed the girls' lead and did not impose her own standards. Although the quality of the production left much to be desired, the girls' satisfaction and the progress they made in their ability to work together well repaid her efforts.

Often adults find the temptation to push for a winning team or a creditable product hard to resist in working with a group of youngsters. One father summed up the dilemma when he said, "I've decided to do my competing on my own time."

Good leadership brings out strengths

When a strict leader lays down the rules and enforces them sternly, children in the group tend to be unfriendly and bossy with each other rather than cooperative and friendly. When the severe disciplinarian leaves the group for a few minutes, roughhousing usually breaks out. This is evidence that such tight controls are not desirable.

The adult who encourages group planning and guides young people toward the goals they have set for themselves usually helps them get the most out of the group experience. A colorful and accurate description of what an adult might contribute to a group was set down by a boys' club who asked a community center for leadership. These boys were skeptical about working with an adult leader, even as they requested one, for their own experiences had made them resistant and suspicious. They were, they said, "tired of interference." This was their written statement of qualifications for the leader they hoped to find:

"He might help in 'straightening out' some of us in this group—he could talk to us, and maybe some of us who haven't been so interested would be more active.

"He could suggest new things to do such as ideas for club affairs and ways to raise money so that our club can be popular and lead the way in affairs.

"He could sign papers for us and help us in our negotiations with adults because they are always trying to take advantage of us.

"He could help us keep in line and keep the meeting in order so we would get more done. He could point out what we should and

should not do and give the reasons. Then we'll decide. We want a guy who understands us fellows—who isn't too old, but is one you can talk to. We don't want a guy who's too bossy or strict, but we want one who will keep his word when he says something. We want a guy who's respectable, who will let us know where he stands, but who thinks we're OK, even if we don't always agree with him."

This is an excellent roadmap for any adult who would like to be helpful to a group of young people.

BOSTON PUBLIC LIBRARY



3 9999 05708 6983

children's bureau publication no. 384—1960

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF
HEALTH, EDUCATION, AND WELFARE
Social Security Administration
Children's Bureau





